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AUTHOR Schierloh, Jane M.
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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study investigated the test-taking behaviors, knowledge, and perceptions of 20 urban, adult basic education students reading at third to fifth grade equivalency levels. The entire reading comprehension subtest of the Test of Adult Basic Education, levels E and M, was administered under standardized conditions. A combination of observation and self-report methodologies was used. The researcher observed the participants during the test and asked some questions raised by observations after the test. A few days later, the researcher asked the participants to give advice to a hypothetical test-taker and to read each passage aloud and choose answers orally without referring to previous answers. A comparative analysis was made of the data. Findings indicated that levels E and M lacked construct validity because the majority of test-takers were penalized for interacting with the text, interpreting it, and bringing their own knowledge and experience to bear upon the question-answering tasks. Two other factors also heavily influenced the validity of participants' scores--test-wiseness and speed. Problems of test design adversely affected participants' ability to demonstrate their reading comprehension skills. The test-takers demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive awareness and self-regulation. (YLB)

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Jane M. Schierloh
Ohio Literacy Resource Center
Kent State University
414 White Hall
Kent, OH 44242-0001
216-672-2007

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THE TEST-TAKING BEHAVIORS, KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS ON A STANDARDIZED READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Running Head: The Test-taking Behaviors

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THE TEST-TAKING BEHAVIORS, KNOWLEDGE, AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS ON A STANDARDIZED READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Multiple-choice standardized tests of reading comprehension are increasingly being used in making decisions about whether to hire people for jobs, offer them job-training, or enroll them in educational programs. It is ironic that this is happening at a time when many professionals in the field of reading are questioning whether such tests are valid measures of reading comprehension (Farr & Carey, 1986; Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Wixson & Peters, 1987). Concerns about whether these tests measure what they purport to measure can only be answered when there is more data about what adults think and do as they take these kinds of tests.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to take a comprehensive as well as detailed look at the test-taking behaviors, knowledge, and perceptions of a little studied population--urban, adult basic education students reading at third to fifth grade equivalency levels. The test used was the reading comprehension subtest of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), the most widely used adult basic skills test in the United States (Jackson, 1990; Sticht, 1991). The study sought answers to three questions:

1. How did participants perceive the purpose of the test and its task demands?
2. What were participants' observable test-taking behaviors?
3. How did participants explain their test-taking behaviors?

The view of the reading process upon which this study was based is defined as the process of negotiating meaning between a reader and an author through the medium of a text. This understanding of the nature of the reading process has necessitated a new look at the ways reading comprehension have traditionally been evaluated.

Method

In contrast to previous studies which have used selections from tests under untimed conditions, this ethnographic study made the testing situation as naturalistic as possible by administering the entire reading comprehension subtest of the TABE, levels E and M, under standardized conditions including time limits and published answer sheets.

The 20 participants were students in a community-based adult literacy program in a large midwestern city. The twelve women and eight men ranged in age from 23 to 64. Sixteen were African-American; one was Hispanic; and three were European-American. Eight had completed a Laubach Literacy program before enrolling in the adult basic education class. Half of the participants had grown up in rural areas in Southern states and in Appalachian areas of West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

I used a combination of observation and self-report methodologies. In the first interview I shadowed the participant as she or he took the test and observed such things as eye and hand movements, time spent reading each passage and question, accuracy with which answers were recorded on the answer sheet, and glances at the clock. After the test, I asked a few questions raised by my observations. A few days later, in a second interview, I asked the participant to give advice to a hypothetical new test-taker about the best way to take this test. Then I asked him or her to read each passage aloud and choose answers orally without referring to previous answers. In other words, participants took the test twice, once under standardized conditions and once orally. After each answer the student was asked, "How did you decide that this was the best answer?"

Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously. A comparative analysis was made of three slices of data: (1) observation notes taken during the administration of the test, (2) the test documents, and (3) transcriptions of the interviews. Using the constant comparative method,

I compared successive cases, identified patterns, and revised them as the data indicated. Four peer reviewers verified the reliability of the patterns I had identified.

Findings

Perceptions of Test Purpose

Based on frequency, there were three main categories of response: (1) A typical response from eight participants was "How well I can read it and understand what I read." Five of these students added: "Get the right answer." It is interesting to note that all of these students based most of their answers solidly on information in test passages. (2) A typical response from seven other participants was "To see what your level is." Four of these students over-relied on their prior knowledge when explaining a number of their answers. (3) A typical response from five participants was "Knowledge of what I know and what I don't know--my learning and education." Four of these students over-relied on their previous knowledge and ignored information in test passages when explaining from 6 to 19 of their answer choices. They seemed to view the test more as a measure of their knowledge than of their ability to comprehend what they read.

It is interesting that participants who had a clear understanding of the purpose of the test based their answers on information in test passages whereas those whose understanding of the test's purpose was less clear tended to base a larger number of answers on their own knowledge and opinions. This finding supports a statement by Peter Johnston (1983) that "Part of the reader's task is to figure out exactly what the goal of the examiner is--what he or she wants to know or to hear." Clearly some participants did not understand what the examiner wanted to know.

Sample Passage

Three test-takers showed signs of confusion and disorientation as soon as they turned the page containing the sample passage and discovered that the

first page of the test was formatted differently than the sample page.

Reading the Passages

All but one of the participants started on page one and worked consecutively to the last page. They explained that they did not realize they were allowed to skip over difficult passages and questions. Some felt they might have had difficulty recording their answers accurately if they had skipped around.

Reading the Questions

Participants taking the easier level of the test often had problems with some of the words and phrases the test routinely uses to frame questions (e.g., according to the passage, phrase). Some did not know the meaning of the word passage ("It's in the Bible," "Someone who rides with you").

Answering the Questions

Participants engaged in sophisticated reasoning processes which they were usually able to articulate. However, they were unable to offer equally cogent reasons for rejecting alternative answers. This was not surprising considering that the majority of participants had indicated that they had little or no previous experience in taking multiple-choice tests.

Many participants interpreted certain passages and questions differently than the interpretation required by the test, and they were able to justify their interpretations. For example, a passage about the French impressionist painter Monet stated that he painted many pictures of the water lilies in the pool in his garden. Test-takers were asked to complete the following statement: "Monet often painted outdoor scenes because he probably..." (Keyed answer: "loved nature") (p. 12, Level E, Form 6). Two students preferred the distractor "had a big garden" because if he had a garden with a pool in it, it must have been a big garden. When one thinks in terms of backyards in the central city, this is a logical assumption. But why did students reject the keyed answer? To the probe: "When you think of nature, what do you think of?"

they answered as follows: Brenda: "The woods, the trees...I don't think of gardens.: Susan: "Ain't no nature! It's about his garden." Both students appeared to define nature as wild and natural, untouched by humans.

Test-takers' alternate interpretations were not always idiosyncratic. Several passages elicited variant interpretations from the majority of participants. One of the major causes of incorrect answers was over-reliance on personal knowledge in preference to information in the text. Participants gave more reader-based answers in response to test passages on familiar topics (e.g., shopping on a limited budget, a letter of complaint about a defective car) than they did on more academic, unfamiliar topics (e.g., Monet's paintings, the history of the umbrella). This confirms the findings of a study by Hill and Perry (1988) which compared adult basic education students' answers on the 1976 version of the TABE with their answers on the revised 1987 version. In the 1987 version the test-makers included some passages designed to be more relevant to adult experiences. However, Hill and Perry reported that the new version confused test-takers more than the old version. The new version's more interesting and relevant passages stimulated readers to relate text to the world outside the passages and to draw upon their own knowledge and experience. However, its questions still required readers to recycle information in the passages. This conflict between the reading task and the question task led students who lacked test-taking skills astray. They were especially apt to give reader-based answers when the information in a passage contradicted their own experience.

Recording Answers on the Answer Sheet

Three participants had major problems with tracking visually from the test booklet to the bubble answer sheet. One such student recorded only 9 answers correctly, but orally answered 21 questions correctly. Nearly half had some minor difficulty recording their answers. These errors resulted in the loss of a point or in lost time spent erasing and re-recording some of

their answers. The design of the answer sheets contributed to students' difficulties. For example, the columns and question numbers on the answer sheet did not correspond to the columns and question numbers on the test booklet.

There were surprisingly few answer changes. Nine participants made no changes and another five made one or two changes. Two test-takers said that they thought they were not allowed to erase. Brenda: "In most tests...they don't want you to erase and smear up the paper and get it all dirty lookin'. When I was in school, they didn't allow you to erase. If you picked a answer, and you wanted to change it, it was just too bad. You just got that wrong." Others said they did not change answers because of time limits.

Finishing Within Time Limits

Only 45% were able to complete the 40 questions in the allotted 37 minutes, and two of those who completed the test did so by ceasing to read the passages when they saw that time was running out. It is important to note that the Educational Testing Service considers a test to be speeded if fewer that 80% finish the test (Davis, Kaiser, & Boone, 1987)., and Morante (1989) has argued that 90% should be able to finish a test.

The speeded nature of the TABE particularly penalized slow, deliberate, thoughtful people. May complained: "I have to read and then think, you know. I can't just shout out the answer, just off. I have to think about it, and that's sort of put a bind on me..."

All but one of the participants felt strongly that random guessing in order to finish on time was wrong. Mike: "I would not guess! Guessing is not helping you any." Susan: "I wouldn't guess...It isn't right because you should properly read it and then figure out what the answer is...It's like cheating! You're not doing what you're supposed to do."

When allowed to finish the test untimed, participants did not change their test-taking behaviors significantly and took only 2 to 15 extra minutes.

Conclusions

The first major conclusion of this study is that levels E and M did not give a valid picture of the reading comprehension proficiency of the majority of the participants. If reading is viewed as a process in which the reader actively searches for meaning by integrating information from text with his or her own experience and knowledge, then this test lacks construct validity because the majority of test-takers in this study were penalized to a greater or lesser degree for interacting with the text, interpreting it, and bringing their own knowledge and experience to bear upon the question-answering tasks.

Two other factors also heavily influenced the validity of participants' scores--test-wiseness and speed. As a result, the test scores of the majority of participants gave a lower estimate of their reading comprehension ability than their oral performance on the test indicated. Their reluctance to use random guessing to finish within time limits further lowered their scores.

Three problems of test design also adversely affected participants' ability to demonstrate their reading comprehension skills: a sample passage whose format differed from the format of the actual test, answer sheets whose columns and numbers did not correspond to the columns and numbers of the test booklet, and unfamiliar words used to frame questions.

A second major conclusion is that the ABE test-takers who participated in this study demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive awareness and self-regulation. Both high scorers and low scorers could explain what they did and why they did it. In addition, their comments and explanations revealed them to be motivated readers with a strong sense of integrity as learners.

As a teacher researcher, the most important thing that I learned from doing this study was the value of listening to students as they explained how they chose their answers. I am convinced that any valid assessment instrument which attempts to measure reading comprehension in order to inform instruction must include evaluation of the process by which students get their answers as well as evaluation of the answers themselves.

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